

Walking with God in Taking a Life Partner

Dennis Williams – The Navigators’ U.S. Metro Ministries – Detroit
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Choosing a life partner, next to deciding whom you will serve with your life, is the biggest decision a person will ever make. The longer a decision will impact our lives, the more time and care should be put into the decision-making process. If the results of a decision will be with us for a lifetime, each aspect of the issue should be thought through with due diligence. Many people are more careful about buying a car than they are about choosing a life partner. You can change cars in a few months or years if the one you choose doesn’t suit you. But to divorce someone would be devastating to you and many, many others, bringing pain, hurt and difficulties that in many cases never go away. A friend once told me, “If I had known the hell that I was going to encounter as a result of my divorce, I would have fought harder to keep my marriage together.” Could he have also been more careful in choosing a life partner in the first place?

Anyone can “get married” – you can do that tomorrow if you want. There will always be someone out there who will marry you. But “taking a life partner” is an entirely different issue. One must ask a completely different set of questions when you talk about “taking a life partner” as opposed to “getting married”. Most marriage professionals (counselors, pastors, etc.) today strongly recommend three to six months of both pre-engagement and pre-marital counseling.

Pre-engagement counseling is critical in taking a life partner. Before you become engaged, you want to sit down with a third person who has seen many marriages, who knows what it takes to have a good marriage, and who knows the questions to ask. Let them ask the hard questions and challenge your thinking. If you type in “pre-engagement counseling” on the internet, you’ll find many resources on this subject. Proverbs 28:26 says, “He who trusts in his own mind is a fool; but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered.” Likewise, “Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” (Proverbs 26:12) Don’t think you are experienced enough as a young person to make wise decisions on your own in this area. Get help from others who are more experienced than you. It may protect your life in more ways than you can imagine.

Below are several principles that I have found to be very important when going through the process of taking a life partner. I write these from over 35 years of experience of working with young men and women in their teens and early 20’s, plus my own experience of choosing a life partner, which turned out to be a wonderful journey!

Principle #1 – Don’t make this decision alone

God’s Word tells us, “Where there is no guidance, a people falls; but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.” (Proverbs 11:14) Choose two to three people in your life who are walking with the Lord, love you, know you well and will be honest with you. If possible, include your parents in this group. Make a decision never to pursue a possible marriage relationship with anyone until you thoroughly talk it over with the people you’ve chosen, and they have a sense of peace concerning your decision. If there is any hesitancy on their part, wait awhile. Work through the issues that make them uncomfortable. God has given you these people to guide and protect you – trust Him.

A classic story of someone who did not ask counsel or listen to advice from anyone concerning relationships and marriage is found in the book of Judges in the Bible. In chapter 14, Samson “saw” one of the Philistine women (he let his eyes and his attraction get the best of him) and told his parents, “Get her for me; for she pleases me well.” In that culture, as a young man, you weren’t allowed to “go after” a girl or “ask them out”, as in our culture today. Your parents had to approach her parents first. Samson’s parents tried to reason with him, but he wouldn’t listen (vs 14:3). He did end up marrying the Philistine woman, but the situation turned very ugly, and his wife ultimately was taken away from him and given to the man who was Samson’s best man in his wedding (vs 14:20).

Samson’s second relationship turned out even worse. In Judges 16, it says “he loved” a woman named Deli’lah. Because of the relationship, his eyes were gouged out and he lost his life. It was not a very happy ending. In fact, it was the opposite of Proverbs 11:14, “In an abundance of counselors there is safety.”

I made a commitment to the Lord that I would not pursue a relationship unless two of the main mentors God had used significantly in my life had peace about it, as well as my parents. Three times I went to them with “heart flutters”, as I used to call them, an attraction to a girl. All three times, God did not give at least two of them a good feeling about the situation. So even though it was hard, I trusted God and did not take the relationship any further. In contrast, when I went to them about Sara, who is now my wife, all of them had a good feeling in their hearts as to the person and timing in both of our lives. As I look back, I’m so thankful I submitted to God’s guidance through them. He protected me and gave me a wonderful life partner.

Principle #2 – Be prepared

I lived in Boston for seven years and watched the start of the Boston Marathon several times. Those in the front were well-prepared. They had planned carefully for many months, buying the best running shoes and forming a clear strategy for the race. They were excited about finishing the race from the very start. I saw runners in the back of the pack dressed in Batman, Spiderman and other superhero costumes. They had obviously spent no time preparing for the race, and were excited only about starting the race, not about finishing. In the same way, don’t be enamored with the idea of “getting married” or the marriage ceremony. That is only the start of the race. Think through what it will take to finish the race, and prepare well before starting. You’ll be glad you did when you come to the “Heartbreak Hill” segment of your marriage someday, just as everyone does who runs in the Boston Marathon.

Think through what it will be like being married to this person five, ten, twenty, fifty years from now. Think through as many scenarios as you can...

- Will he or she be a good parent to our children?
- What will it be like making decisions with this person – financial, priorities, etc?
- What will it be like being part of this person’s family? What will it be like having this person in my family?
- What will this person bring to our marriage? What strengths, gifts and qualities has he or she developed that will add value to our relationship and family?
- Do I see myself developing and growing if I’m partnered with this person for life, or will my life start to shut down?

- How will he or she respond when life gets difficult?
- Will I be able to pray together with this person, and will he or she join with me in trusting God together for things?
- Am I willing to sacrifice to help this person fulfill his or her dreams in life, and is he or she willing to sacrifice to help me fulfill my dreams as well?
- Will I enjoy living with this person for the rest of my life after our “nest is empty?” Even if you have children, you could live approximately 50% of your married life as just the two of you.

Another way of saying it is, “Play the video all the way to the end.” Don’t pause the video at some “high point” in your growing relationship with a person and assume the relationship will remain that way forever. Think it through! Life changes and unexpected things will happen. Will your relationship be able to withstand the storms that will come your way?

A great movie on thinking ahead in life before taking a life partner is “Love’s Enduring Promise”. It is a story of a young woman back in pioneer days who had a wealthy young man pursuing her. At one point in the movie, he asks her to marry him. In pondering her answer, she begins to see into the future, and realizes what it would be like being married to this man. She ends up telling him no, and marrying another who had the character she felt would lead to a long-term fulfilling marriage. It has some great lessons on family, relationships, guarding your heart and taking a life partner wisely. Moral of the story – just because someone shows an interest in you or pursues you does not mean it is the right relationship for a life partner.

Are there personal issues in either of your lives that should be addressed before getting married – addictions, co-dependencies, past relationships, sin issues, fears, compulsive behaviors, etc? Marriage will not solve everything with which you are struggling. In fact, marriage may magnify the problems. Romans 13:12 speaks of “...casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light.” Being honest, bringing everything to the light, putting all the cards on the table, is like putting on armor. It will protect you and your marriage. It will help you prepare for what is ahead.

Talk with your friends who have been married for a year or so, and ask them about what they experienced when they got married. What surprises did they run into? What expectations did they have that turned out not to be true? What do they wish they had known before they got married? What would they do differently in the decision-making process concerning marriage if they had it to do over again? Learn from the experience of others. It is one of the best ways to prepare for your marriage.

Principle #3 – Good and bad reasons

Think through why you are getting married. There are good reasons and bad reasons for getting married. Talk with those you respect who have been married for several years, and ask them what they would say are good and bad reasons to get married. Then start compiling a list yourself that you can use to help you evaluate your own thinking. Below are a few to consider...

Bad reasons to get married can include:

- I want to get out away from my parents.
- I'm lonely.
- I just want to get married (for any number of reasons).
- The other person is pressuring me to marry him or her.

Good reasons to get married can include:

- It's the right time for both of us. It's the right next step in both of our lives.
- It fits in with God's leading in my life.
- We will be a good team in building a life together.
- It is honoring to God.
- It will help to remain sexually pure and treat my betrothed properly as I should. (1 Corinthians 7:36-38)

If you are a "romantic" by nature, be extra careful. The tendency for those who are romantics is to "check their brains at the door", to go by their feelings. If it feels good, it does not mean that it is necessarily right, or that it will work out. Feeling romantic when you are with a person, feeling like you are "in love" (which most of the time is infatuation), is not a good foundation for a marriage. The feelings will cool down after the wedding ceremony, and you will have to live with the person you married the rest of your life. You will want to have a stronger foundation for your marriage than simply "liking them" or "feeling good when you're around them." 99% of your married life will be lived with daylight and dishes, not with moonlight and roses!

Principle #4 – Parallel paths in life

Amos 3:3 (New KJV) says, "Can two walk together unless they are agreed?" God cautions us in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16, "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?..." If you have not figured out your path in life – who you are and what you want to give your life to – then you are not ready to be married. Marriage is a covenant in which two people commit themselves to becoming one. If they don't know what that "one" is, the marriage will fall apart. I've attached an article by Dr. Neil Clark Warren that addresses this issue, entitled, *When is the Right Age to Get Married?* It shows that the more time you've had to mature in life, the better your chance of having a successful marriage.

Before thinking about engagement, work at defining and getting onto the path you feel God wants you personally to take in life. And when you get on the path, look around for others on that same path. When I met Sara, we were both headed in the same direction in life, on the same path with many of the same values and goals. It was natural to take hold of each other's hand in marriage and continue right down the path God had us on without missing a step. Our paths merged together easily.

It's better to be lonely and unmarried than it is to be lonely and married. An older friend told us after her husband died, "I'm now finally free to do what I know God has wanted me to do all my life." She knew when she got married that she was not on the same path of life as her future husband, but she went through with the marriage anyway because of

his pressure. It led to a life of deep loneliness, sorrow and regret. She was unable to do what she knew God called her to do in life, and to be who she knew God made her to be.

I once dated a girl for several years. I really liked her, and both of our families enjoyed each other. We had a lot of fun together. I do have to admit that the relationship started with the typical worldly thinking of “find a cute girl and go out with her”. But as time went on, it became clear that we were on two different paths in life, and could not be life partners. It was very hard to break off the relationship, and both of us shed a lot of tears. I learned through that experience that simply liking someone is not a sufficient reason to get married.

Also, are both of you willing to move 100% into each other’s families, to love the family members of your life partner as you would your own, and to build relationships within each other’s families as the years go on? You are marrying a family, not just an individual. If a person is pulling you away from your family, he or she is probably not the right person to choose as a life partner. Be sure you are both committed to moving fully into the dynamics and relationships of each other’s families, good and bad. You want to marry someone that will work with you to bring joy to your extended family. Genesis 26:35 speaks of the wives Esau married and says, “...they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah” (Esau’s parents). It is true that a man needs to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, but God has each of you on a family path that is not going to go away.

Principle #5 – Everything has a time

Ecclesiastes 3:5 says, “There is a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing.” There are different stages in life, and every stage of life has a purpose. An important part of the years between approximately 17 and 23 is to figure out who you are, your path and direction in life, and your values. These are the years when you are “painting on your own canvas”, when your own life story is beginning to unfold and take shape and color. If two people both build wisely during these years, taking advantage of being single to grow and develop personally, then they will both have a lot to bring to the table when they get married. God encourages us in Proverbs 24:27 to “Prepare your work outside, get everything ready for you in the field; and after that build your house.” You want to marry someone who has invested well in his or her life.

Attached is an article entitled *Before Looking for a Partner, Look Within Yourself* by Dr. Neil Clark Warren. It speaks of the importance of knowing and developing yourself before moving into marriage.

Don’t waste these years. A young woman I know has a great personality and is attractive and talented. Guys ask her out regularly, but she has decided to decline at this point in her life. She says, “Thanks so much for your interest in me, but I have other priorities right now in life that I need to be pursuing.” She is building many great friendships and having a lot of fun, but purposefully staying away from exclusive relationships for now. She is going to make someone a great wife someday, and is wisely looking for someone who is also investing well in his life.

Principle #6 – Undivided devotion to the Lord

Have you ever wondered what God thinks about marriage? Check out 1 Corinthians chapter 7. He wants us to be completely devoted to Him, because making Him the focus of our life is the path of life. Verse 35 says, “I say this for your own benefit, not to lay any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and to secure your undivided devotion to the Lord.” If we are putting God first in our lives, there will be a “good order” to how we approach relationships. We won’t move in and out of relationships based on our feelings, but rather on our commitment to the Lord. God honors us when we put Him first, living our lives devoted to Him. The more we let Him be the Master of our lives, the more He leads us into fullness of life.

The enemy lies to us by saying, “Don’t let God make the decision for you about who you are going to marry. You can decide that yourself. After all, God doesn’t have your best in mind. If you do what He guides you to do, you’ll be sorry.” But exactly the opposite is true! God loves you more than you love yourself – He created you! He knows the future, he is infinitely wise and he is deeply committed to guiding and caring for you as your Good Shepherd. Jesus said in John 10:10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that you may have life and have it abundantly.” Trust Him. Give your life to serving and honoring Him, and let that be the guiding factor in making life-partner decisions.

Don’t compromise. Wait for God’s timing and God’s guidance. When I was twenty, I made a decision to serve the Lord Jesus with my life: to trust Him, follow Him and allow Him to be the Master of my life. I chose to let Him guide my life because I realized that He alone had my best interests in mind. I have never been disappointed. In fact, I’ve been thrilled!

John Piper, a pastor in Minneapolis, gives a warning in this area. He writes, “It is wrong to be yoked to one who refuses the yoke of Christ. Don’t marry an unbeliever. Not all relationships with unbelievers are ruled out, otherwise we could not obey Jesus’ command to love them and bless them. But ‘yoke’ implies a connectedness that either governs where we go or constrains where they go. And you cannot constrain faith in Jesus. It is free (*has to be free to follow the Lord where He leads*).” (From an article by John Piper, *Things I’ve Learned* – March 28, 2007 – Italics mine)

Women, keep your purity standards high, and tell men by your actions, “If you want me, you have to win me. I’m not giving myself to just anyone, because I belong first to the Lord.” If the man is worth marrying, he will step up to the challenge. Women who give themselves away easily end up marrying men who take advantage of them. That is not the type of life partner you want to choose.

A decision to stay sexually pure before marriage does at least three things:

1. It fosters maturity in the relationship.
2. It lays foundations on which commitment and trust can grow.
3. It builds a hedge of protection against future adulterous relationships.

Principle #7 – Guard your heart

Be careful to not fall in love with the notion of falling in love. Proverbs 4:23 says, “Keep your heart with all vigilance; for from it flow the springs of life.” A friend of mine told me that she refused to buy Bride magazines until after she was engaged. This was one way she chose to guard her heart. The day after she was engaged, with great joy, she went out and bought her first wedding planning magazine. She is a wise woman and she has a great marriage today.

An entertaining movie that shows the contrast between two sisters in this struggle is *Sense & Sensibility*. One sister does not guard her heart and is unwisely romantic with men. In the end, she is deeply hurt. The other sister guards her heart. And though it was painful at times, she is rewarded with great joy when the right situation relationally falls into place.

Three times in the book of Song of Solomon, Solomon says, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or the does of the field, that you not stir up or awaken love until it pleases (until the time is right).” (2:7, 3:5, 8:4) In other words, guard your emotions, because once you start down the path of love, it can be like spooking a deer in the field. After it takes off, it is almost impossible to settle it down again.

Remember that you are choosing a life partner, not just accepting another invitation to go out with someone. This is for keeps. One man told his granddaughter, “Remember, honey, in a fishing contest, you don’t keep the first fish you catch!” She was dating a guy who didn’t have a clear vision or purpose for his life, and her grandfather encouraged her to keep looking. Go for a big fish – expand your vision! Wait and look for someone who is developing his or her life, and who will have a lot to bring to your marriage. You are building a team when you get married, a team to build a life together and perhaps raise a family someday. You only get one chance to choose a teammate, so choose wisely, or you might be trapped and frustrated for the rest of your life.

Proverbs 20:25 says, “It is a snare for a man to say rashly, ‘It is holy,’ and to reflect only after making his vows.” Similarly, Proverbs 14:15 says, “The simple believes everything, but the prudent looks where he is going.” Look once, look twice, look a third time. Then stop to consider again until you are certain.

Don’t let your heart make the decision for you. Just because a person is interested in you does not mean you have to reciprocate the interest. One trap is to marry someone because you feel sorry for him or her. This can be especially true for women. Compassion is never a good reason to marry someone. You may end up nursing a loser the rest of your life, and that’s not a marriage you want!

Principle #8 – Don’t defraud others

Elizabeth Elliot has a wonderful book on relationships entitled Passion and Purity. In the book, she mentions that her father told her brothers, “Don’t ever tell a girl ‘I love you’ until you are immediately ready to follow it up with the question, ‘Will you marry me?’”. We can defraud others by giving them wrong expectations or stirring up emotions in them that we do not intend to satisfy, or that we cannot righteously fulfill. A friend of mine had a daughter who dated a guy for three years in college. Her heart became deeply entwined

in the relationship – she really loved him. But all that he wanted was to have a girlfriend in college with whom to do things, and to enjoy the feeling of “being in love”. The morning of their graduation, he told her that he did not want to continue the relationship, but thanked her for the fun times they had together in school. She was crushed. Her dad told me it was like a divorce for her, and it took her several years to heal.

Also, honor God’s timing in the other person’s life. I told Sara I would never ask her to marry me until she felt the time was right, and until she told me she was ready. I never wanted to put any pressure on her, but I wanted her to be free to do as the Lord led her. I also gave her the freedom to seek God apart from me in regards to our relationship. I did not want to defraud her by “talking her into” our relationship, but I asked her to pray about each next step as our relationship grew, and I waited until she was ready. I wanted her to feel she could trust me, because trust is a key building block in a good marriage.

Lastly, save the best of romance and pursuing each other until after you are married. So often a man will pursue a woman until they are married, then he stops. A woman wants to be pursued all her life. One of the secrets of a strong marriage (as well as a strong walk with God) is continuing to pursue the person, even though they are already yours. Sometimes young guys and gals are far from getting engaged, yet they call themselves a couple, celebrate anniversaries and use endearing names such as “sweetheart”. You defraud the other person, and yourself, by not waiting. Don’t open your presents before Christmas – you’ll regret it later. The more romance you save for marriage, the more special it will be.

Principle #9 – Don’t be conformed to the world

Romans 12:1-2 says, “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The world operates in rebellion to God, but God calls us to belong to Him so that He can guide us into true, fulfilling paths of life. When we conform to the world, it leads to death, not life. Think about the ways the world handles dating and relationships, then develop a plan of how you are going to do it using the wisdom that God gives in His Word, and stick to it. Don’t be conformed to the world.

We are not to operate like those in the world who do not yet know the Lord. As it says in 1 Thessalonians 4:1-5, “Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. ²For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. ³For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from unchastity; ⁴that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, ⁵not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God.” We are to honor God in the way we take a life partner, not in passion of the flesh as the world does.

Make a commitment that you are going to take a life partner in a way that honors God. It leads to great joy in your life in the years to come. In 1 Samuel 2:30 God says, “...those who honor me I will honor.” That is quite a promise.

Principle #10 – Learn to look to God to meet your needs

Only God can meet our deepest needs. The best thing you can do to build foundations for your marriage in the future is to learn to draw on God today for your deepest needs. If two people come together and look only to the other person to meet their deepest needs, it is like two ticks without a dog (not the prettiest analogy, but it is true!). You can't draw life from another person.

Marriage is meant to be a threesome, not a twosome, relationship. Picture a triangle with the man and woman on the bottom corners, and the Lord on the top. The more that each individually draws near the Lord, the closer they become to each other. When I felt lonely in my single years, I decided I was going to spend extra time alone with the Lord and learn to let Him satisfy those longings. I'm so glad I learned that before I was married. Your spouse is not God. He or she will disappoint you and fail you at times, just like you will them. Sara told me one time after we were married, "You know, I've found if I just spend good time with the Lord each day in His word and in prayer, it takes care of about 99% of the issues I face in life."

A young man once told me, "I just have to have a girl in my life." I encouraged him to look to God to meet his emotional needs in life, not to a girl. Several years later he confessed to me that he was not walking with the Lord when he made that comment to me, and now, after being married, he sees that only God can meet his deepest needs. He can't put that pressure on his wife. I'm glad he's finally learned that lesson in life – he now has a great marriage.

Another key decision to make is that you will trust God for a life partner. There is a bad line of reasoning circulating among young adults today that may be worded something like this: "I had better grab the first person I can find who is a Christian and marry them because there aren't too many out there. Another chance may not come along." God is bigger than that! He has promised in Matthew 6:33, "Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well." God will provide for those who put Him first. A verse that makes me tremble in the Bible is Psalm 106:15, "He gave them what they asked, but sent a wasting disease among them." If you want to get married above anything else, God may just give you what you ask. But the results may end up being more devastating than you could ever have imagined. Wait for God to provide. You will not be disappointed.

Principle #11 – Learn the art of friendship

After you become married, you will only have one intimate relationship with the opposite sex, and that will be with your chosen life partner. With all others, you will only have a friendship. So, before you are married, you want to learn to build friendships with the others of the opposite sex in a non-intimate, appropriate way. I was part of a group after college that had a lot of fun together. Very few in the group "paired up", but focused instead on being good friends. Over time, some in the group moved from being friends to becoming engaged and married, but it started out in a very healthy context of building good friendships. You want to marry a good friend, and friendships take time to develop.

I heard about a young woman who told a young man, “No thanks. I don’t want to ‘go out’ with you and ruin our friendship.” Going out or exclusively dating can ruin a friendship if it is the wrong time. Many who “break up” end up feeling awkward and unable to relate freely to the other person ever again. So be careful of exclusive relationships before the timing and purpose is right. Focus instead on creating godly friendships and having fun together. Learn to show attention to all but intention for none. Be a good friend to all the guys and gals you meet. Learn to have friendships that don’t always involve intimacy. After you are married, you’ll be glad you learned this important skill.

Principle #12 – Time and wisdom

You want to be very wise in the area of taking a life partner. It will impact you every day for the rest of your life. A good life partner will be a lifelong blessing. A bad life partner will be a lifelong nightmare. Proverbs 12:4 says, “A good wife is the crown of her husband, but she who brings shame is like rotteness in his bones.”

Twice in His Word God reminds us that a good life partner is a gift from Him. Proverbs 19:14 says, “House and wealth are inherited from fathers, but a prudent wife is from the LORD.” Take your time and pray for God’s blessing. Ask Him to work out Proverbs 18:22 in your life, “He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and obtains favor from the LORD.”

God understands the value of a good life partner. Proverbs 31:10-12 describes the worth of a such a person – “A good wife who can find? She is far more precious than jewels. ¹¹The heart of her husband trusts in her, and he will have no lack of gain. ¹²She does him good, and not harm, all the days of her life.”

One of the greatest compliments I’ve ever received in life was from one of my mentors as I was seeking his input on a possible relationship. He said to me, “Denny, I can count on one hand the number of men I know who have been wise in the way they went about taking a life partner. You are one of them.”

To be wise, you need a measuring stick to use when evaluating a relationship. You can develop this yardstick in at least two ways:

- a. Ask others you know who are happily married what they think are some of the key principles to follow in taking a life partner. Listen carefully, keep a journal, define the principles clearly in your mind, then don’t violate them. Learn from others who have been down the road before you. Proverbs 13:20 says, “He who walks with wise men becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm.”
- b. Take a good amount of time (several months) to pray about and reflect on the areas that could attract you to another person, or that you may desire in another person. Then with the Lord, carefully prune them down to the two or three that you feel are the most important. Figure out what is most important to you, then don’t compromise. I had two incidences in which I was interested in another person, but when I pulled out the two key areas God had given me to trust Him for in a life partner, the person didn’t measure up adequately, so I didn’t pursue the relationship. In contrast, the initial things that attracted me to Sara were the exact two things God had given me to trust

Him for in a life partner. By processing with the Lord beforehand, I had a yardstick to use in evaluating whether or not to move ahead. It gave me wisdom when I needed it.

Another article I've enclosed is entitled *Your Must-Haves and Can't-Stands* by Dr. Neil Clark Warren. He encourages his readers, as they consider what they want in a life partner, to spend plenty of time pondering, contemplating and soul-searching, carefully sorting and sifting all their likes and dislikes, preferences and aversions, writing them all out.

Never rush into taking a life partner. Time is always your ally, as it will provide stronger and safer grounds for your decision.. One woman commented on the foolishness of her friend getting engaged so quickly: "He hasn't even had a chance to see what she is like during her emotional swings each month!" I chuckled, but she was right. Another counselor once told me, "Many men and women are both deceived going into marriage. The man thinks, 'She'll never change', and the woman thinks, 'He'll change after we get married.' Both are believing a lie." What you see is what you get in a man – observe carefully. What you see at first is not necessarily what you get in a woman (they are very good at putting on make-up!). Take time to get to know the other person in many settings. Knowing a person for one year or two before getting married is wise. Find out about their relationships in their family. The way they relate in their family will be the way they relate in your new family after you are married.

I like the saying, "Before you are married, keep both of your eyes wide open. After you are married, close one." Ask the hard questions before you get married. The less you assume, the less you'll be in for surprises. Then after you are married, overlook a lot of the faults in your imperfect life partner. You chose him or her, so make it work!

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One last word. Trust God with this area of your life. Take some time to read through and reflect on Genesis chapter 24. It is a wonderful story of how God provided a life partner for Isaac, Abraham's son. Malachi 2:15-16 says, "Has not the one God made and sustained for us the spirit of life? And what does he desire? Godly offspring. So take heed to yourselves, and let none be faithless to the wife of his youth. ¹⁶For I hate divorce, says the LORD the God of Israel..." God is more interested in your having a good marriage than you are! He will guide.

You won't do this perfectly. You'll probably make a lot of mistakes along the way, but you'll learn, and God is forgiving, and His grace will help you. That's why He is our Savior! There is no one right path or way to take a life partner. Each story will be unique. Solomon says in Proverbs 30:19 that there are four things he simply can't understand, and one of them is "the way of a man with a maiden." I can't explain how the chemistry of "falling in love" works between two people, but marriage is God's design and He'll work it out as we walk by faith in Him.

May God bless you as you walk with Him in taking a life partner. I'd love to hear your story and what God is teaching you in this area if you'd like to contact me.



OLD ENOUGH TO KNOW

What Is the Right Age to Get Married?

By Neil Clark Warren, Ph.D.

Not long ago, a young couple named David and Cassandra came to see me for premarital counseling. As these fresh-faced lovers sat down on the couch at our first session, they gazed at each other with puppy eyes and sat so close I thought one might end up on the other's lap.

"Dr. Warren," David said, "we're here because we've announced our engagement and our parents think we're too young to get married." They gave each other syrupy smiles and squeezed each other tightly.

"Well, how old are you?" I asked.

"I'm twenty," he said, "and Cassandra is eighteen."

"But what does age really matter anyway?" Cassandra chimed in. "We love each other, and we're right for each other. Everything in our hearts tells us we should be together."

We talked a while, and I remained as open-minded as possible. After all, occasionally even eighteen-year-olds can be surprisingly mature. But the truth became clear when I asked some specific questions, such as how David envisioned his life in ten years.

"I've always been good at art," he replied, "so I'll probably end up in the art field somewhere. But I'm not really sure what I'll choose to do for a career or where we might live or any of that. All I know is that if Cassandra and I are together, we'll be fine. We can make it through anything."

I was beginning to suspect this relationship was long on fantasy and short on reality. So I asked them both to describe themselves their strengths and weakness, their personalities, their style of communication and I received more vague responses. They fumbled for answers and always returned to their "love-will-see-us-through" theme.

Finally I said them, "Look, as a psychologist I try to tell the truth as clearly as I know how, and the truth is this: All those warm, tender feelings you have for each other are important and necessary for marriage. But it's even more important for you to know who you are as individuals, to be clear about where you want to go in life before you make a commitment as critical and all-encompassing as marriage."

Naturally, my truth-telling didn't sit well with these starry-eyed lovers. But I had to give it to them straight. The fact is, whenever a couple in their early twenties or younger comes to me and declares their plans to marry, a neon sign in my mind flashes Danger! From my clinical experience it is clear that the divorce rate for couples under twenty is incredibly high, maybe as high as 80 to 85%. Social scientists have found that people who marry young are seldom prepared for marital roles.

So how old should two people be when they marry? That depends on many factors-maturity level, ability to earn a living, progress in education, and so on. But we can say for sure that, statistically, marriages seem to be much more stable when they begin no earlier than the mid-twenties. As a matter of fact, a recent study indicates that the most stable marriages of all have a "starting date" of twenty-eight years of age. In their book, *Marriage and the Family*, researchers Marcia and Tom Lasswell conclude: "Divorce rates are lowest for men and

women who marry for the first time at age 28 or later. The chances for a stable marriage increase as both partners reach the age of 30 and then the rates level off."

At the heart of the issue is this: Young people can't select a marriage partner effectively if they don't know themselves well. Until they can identify themselves in a precise and detailed way, they are in no position to identify the person to move through life with them. In our culture, the identifying process usually requires most of the first twenty-five to twenty-eight years of life. Identity formation is incomplete until individuals have emotionally separated from their parents and discovered the details of their own uniqueness. Prior to their mid-twenties, most young adults haven't defined their goals and needs. They haven't had time to learn to be independent. They haven't yet "grown into themselves." They simply need more life experience.

The statistic that never fails to hit me with a jolt is this: The divorce rate for those who marry at twenty-one or twenty-two is approximately double the divorce rate for those who marry at twenty-four or twenty-five. Self-identity has to be the reason.

Sometimes the self-identifying task takes even longer than twenty-five years. It's not uncommon for two middle-aged persons to marry with little understanding of who they are as individuals. When your identity process is well developed-when you are clearly in touch with the person you truly are-the task of selecting the right marriage partner becomes significantly easier.

Some couples seem intent on convincing me they're ready for marriage at a young age, that people have married young for eons, and it worked out fine for them. I'm sure that was true in some eras, probably when the general population wasn't expected to live past forty or fifty. But consider: In 1890, the average age of American males at first marriage was slightly over twenty-six years. The median age for females in 1890 was 22 years. Through the years, the average gradually declined to 22.8 for males and 20.3 for females after the Second World War in 1950. But by 1988 the average age for men at first marriage was back up to 25.9, and the average age for women had reached an all-time high of 23.6. The average age at marriage for females is higher now than at any time in our history, and there is a slow, upward trend.

The bottom line is this: If you want to avoid becoming a divorce statistic or living for years in an unhappy marriage take seriously the need to wait until you have personally developed your identity and life goals. If you do, your selection of a mate will be based on the "totally grown up you" and prove to be as good twenty or thirty years from now as it is today.

Dr. Neil Clark Warren is a psychologist and popular speaker based in Pasadena, Calif. His best-selling books include Finding the Love of Your Life and How to Know if Someone Is Worth Pursuing in Two Dates or Less.

This article appeared on Dr. Warren's website <http://www.neilclarkwarren.com/articles.html>

BEFORE LOOKING FOR A LIFE-PARTNER, LOOK WITHIN YOURSELF

By Neil Clark Warren, Ph.D.

Mark and Gina came to see me on a chilly, rainy afternoon. The weather outside seemed to match the mood in my counseling office when this couple plopped down on the couch across from me. Their whole demeanor was frosty and frigid.

"What brings you in for therapy?" I asked them.

They looked at each other, and then Mark spoke. "To put it bluntly, we're miserable. We've been married four years, and every day has been a challenge. We're wondering if we should even keep trying."

I asked Gina if that was the way she saw it.

"I'm afraid so," she replied. "About two days after we returned from the honeymoon, we both had the sickening feeling that we had made a huge mistake. It's been downhill since then."

As our session unfolded, Mark and Gina told a story I've heard scores of times from marriage partners in peril. After a blissful courtship, they married and almost immediately discovered vast differences. They were opposites when it came to communication style, conflict resolution, personal habits, and a few dozen other qualities that come to light when you live with someone. Somehow all these differences were pushed aside and ignored amid their initial intoxicating feelings of infatuation.

So they ended up at my office, attempting to figure out how a relationship that held such promise could plummet to the depths of drudgery.

Gina said something that day I wish every single person could hear and grasp:

"I realize now that I had no idea who I was before I got married. I was thirty years old, and I just wanted to get married while I had the chance. Mark was a nice guy who had a good job and came from a solid family. I figured, What more could a girl want? Unfortunately, I had only the vaguest notion of my deep longings, my unique personality traits, my strengths and weaknesses. And since I didn't know who I was, I didn't have a clue about the kind of person I needed for a partner."

As this couple painfully discovered, you can't select the right person to marry until you know precisely who you are-unless you're lucky. But nobody should rely on luck when it comes to a decision that determines who will be your lifetime roommate, financial partner, joint parent of every child you have . . . and ten thousand other crucial matters.

You can make a great choice of a marriage partner-and the place to start is with a careful understanding of exactly who you are. The more you know about yourself, the clearer will be your sense of inner direction when it comes to finding the love of your life. With increased knowledge about your physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual qualities, your skillfulness as a mate selector will soar. People who find dating confusing and bewildering almost always lack familiarity with themselves.

Scratch Beneath the Surface

I'm often amazed and alarmed at the lack of knowledge singles have about themselves. Whether in therapy or discussions after speaking engagements, I frequently ask single men or women to tell me about themselves. Most do well at describing external aspects of their life: "Well, I work as a computer programmer, I love to ski and roller-blade, and I'm very active in my church group." But when asked about their personality type, communication style, character strengths and weaknesses, or dreams for the future, they grope for responses: "I, uh, well . . . I guess I need to think about that some more."

So how do you go about understanding yourself better? There's no crash course on self-discovery, but let me offer four ways to get started:

1. Write in a journal or notebook every day. You don't need to write for more than ten or fifteen minutes, but it's critical that you record your honest thoughts and feelings as they come to you. The goal is to practice tapping in to your internal reservoir.
2. See a counselor. You don't need to be in crisis to visit a therapist. Schedule four or five sessions to explore your family background, personality makeup, and goals. You may wish to take a personality test (such as the MMPI or Myers-Briggs) and discuss the results with the counselor.
3. Read something every day that stimulates your internal process. For example, I read a chapter of the Bible every morning. Other people prefer poetry or psychology books or novels that explore spiritual themes. This kind of reading has a way of leading you toward the center of yourself. If you read with a personal perspective--that is, with an eye for how the writing affects you and speaks to your daily needs--you will get more deeply in touch with your inner thoughts and feelings.
4. Spend regular time with people who know themselves well and who encourage you to talk about what you feel most strongly. Get personal with these people. Try to understand them as best you can, and tell them as fully as possible about who you are.

The payoff for all this self-discovery and self-awareness is simple but profound: Men and women who know themselves well stand an excellent chance of selecting a mate well suited to them. Conversely, those people who are largely unaware of their inner workings make a decision as if they're spinning a roulette wheel--they cross their fingers and hope for the best.

When it comes to something as critical and all-encompassing as marriage, it's simply unwise to "hope" for the best when you can know for certain who would make the best partner for you.

Dr. Neil Clark Warren is a psychologist and popular speaker based in Pasadena, Calif. His best-selling books include Finding the Love of Your Life and How to Know if Someone Is Worth Pursuing in Two Dates or Less.

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YOUR MUST-HAVES AND CAN'T-STANDS

Make Your List Before You Go "Shopping" for a Partner

By Neil Clark Warren, Ph.D.

Suppose you could choose ten qualities that your future spouse will have. Which would you choose? But wait-let's sweeten the deal. Not only do you get to select ten positive qualities this person will have, but you can also identify and eliminate ten deficits. Which twenty items would make your list?

At a recent singles seminar where I spoke, I asked for a volunteer and an energetic young woman named Jessie came bounding up to podium.

"Okay, Jessie," I said. "I'm going to put you on the hot seat. I want you to tell everybody here what you're looking for in a partner."

"Oh, that's no problem," she responded, clearly enjoying being my guinea pig. "I can tell you exactly what I want in a man, because I've given it a lot of thought. I want someone who's good-looking, hard-working, fun-loving-oh yeah, and mentally stable."

The audience laughed, and I said, "That's a good start. What else?"

She thought for several moments, then said, "Well, uh, I guess he'd need to have good manners, too. And I want a man who's thoughtful-someone who will bring me flowers and chocolate."

I asked if she wanted to add anything else to her list, and she said, "Nope. That's it. If I could marry a man like that, I'd be very happy!"

Then I got to the point of this exercise: "Actually, Jessie, I don't think you'd be very happy. Based on my thirty-five years of experience as a psychologist, I can tell you that when people name only a few indistinct qualities, they end up with a spouse who has a lot of characteristics they don't like. And over the course of many years, undesirable traits or missing attributes become a source of tremendous frustrations. I'm not trying to pick on you, Jessie, because the vast majority of singles I talk to have a list like yours. It's far too vague, general, and limited. To find a partner who is a great match for you-and to someday have an outstanding marriage-you must be extremely precise about what it is you want and don't want in a partner."

Your "Top Ten" Lists

All of this is why I stress to singles the vital importance of compiling lists of top ten positive qualities and top ten negative qualities-or what I call "must-have" and "can't-stand" lists. Becoming crystal clear about these characteristics will prepare you to be a highly efficient "mate shopper," a person who will know with confidence and clarity whether a potential partner is worth pursuing. If you think it's important to have a shopping list when you go to the grocery store, it's a thousand times more important to have a shopping list when you're looking for a partner.

So what should go on your list? That all depends on you. You've got to spend plenty of time pondering, contemplating, and soul-searching. After carefully sorting and sifting all your likes and dislikes, your preferences and aversions, write them all out. Make a long, detailed inventory-and then narrow it down through a process of elimination. Your goal is to end up with a total of twenty nonnegotiable items.

For instance, I know many people for whom spiritual pursuits are the most important parts of their life. They pray frequently, think a lot about their relationship with God, attend church and Bible classes regularly, and are convinced that the development of their spiritual life matters more than anything else. These people need to put SPIRITUAL PASSION at the top of their must-have list in capital letters.

We could cite hundreds of examples. If you keep your house, car and desk clean and spotless, and if it's important that your spouse share your passion for neatness, put this on your list. If you hate secondhand smoke, you should put "smoking" on your can't-stand list. If you are super ambitious, and if you get bored by complacent, apathetic people, write "must be a go-getter" on your list. If you have a need for fun and laughter, put "great sense of humor" on your list.

Why Limit the Lists?

Since I believe that there are hundreds of qualities you might wish for in a lifetime mate, I put a limit of ten on your lists only for mathematical and practical reasons. Your "pool of candidates" is usually so limited that your chance of finding a person with every quality on a list of twenty-five or fifty items is very slim.

Here's what I mean: A woman's pool of possible spouses is comprised of single men she meets at work, church, the gym, her neighborhood, the softball team, and so on. So if a woman says she wants a partner with a college education, she immediately eliminates many of the men she knows. Likewise, if she wants a man free of all addictions and emotional hang-ups, she eliminates another sizable part of the population. With every criterion from her list, her pool of eligible, qualified bachelors shrinks considerably. We would need a mathematician to calculate the total number of persons required in the beginning pool for her to end up with a "Mr. Right" after applying ten rigorous must-haves and ten equally rigorous can't-stands.

Do You Really Need a "List?"

Some singles I work with absolutely refuse to build a shopping list. They say, "If I can't find a person who meets what I know to be necessary for me to be happy, then maybe I'll need to lower my standards." And here's what they never say but what I'm convinced they mean: "I want to get married! I need to get married! Therefore, if I have to settle for less, so be it. After all, a less-than-ideal man (or woman) is better than no man at all."

I argue against this theme with everything I have. I encourage people to figure out the kind of person they need in order to be really happy and then to hold to these criteria to the very end. Otherwise, they could easily end up being part of the marital failure epidemic plaguing our nation.

Dr. Neil Clark Warren is a psychologist and popular speaker based in Pasadena, Calif. His best-selling books include Finding the Love of Your Life and How to Know if Someone Is Worth Pursuing in Two Dates or Less.

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What You Really Want in a Mate

By Neil Clark Warren, Ph.D.

One of the keys to healthy mate selection is deciding what type of person you want in your life. In order to determine who will mesh with you to create a brilliant, loving, and long-term relationship, you have to spend some time examining the various human dimensions. In his book *Date...or Soul Mate? How To Know If Someone Is Worth Pursuing in Two Dates Or Less*, Dr. Neil Clark Warren has highlighted ten dimensions for consideration. There is no "right" answer, but it is extremely important that you dedicate some time to establishing your preferences in these ten areas.

Intelligence – There are many kinds of intelligence: book smarts, street smarts, intuitive intelligence, mechanical intelligence, etc. You may feel more comfortable with an analytical person than with someone who has a highly developed emotional intelligence. Few people would want to date someone significantly less intelligent than they are, but people with very high IQ's often have considerable difficulty interacting socially. These are all options that must be considered when determining the type of intelligence you want in your partner.

Personality – The key to determining the type of personality you want in a mate is "harmony." This person's tendencies should complement your own. If you are a strong decision-maker, you may need to find a person that is easy-going and feels comfortable leaving things up to you. You can start to explore your personality preferences by examining what types of friends you currently enjoy. Do you prefer quiet, introspective people, or talkative, gregarious types? Do you prefer people who are intense or laid-back? These answers will steer you in the right direction.

Appearance – Most people are pretty sure what physical traits they want in a relationship partner. But it is important to make sure that your physical requirements are your own, not just those being pushed by modern media. In addition, try not to make physical requirements "deal breakers." It may be that you prefer blond hair and Scandinavian features, but refusing to date a great person because they lack those traits may be cheating yourself out of a great relationship.

Ambition – Dr. Warren explains it this way: "It is absolutely vital that two people have about the same amount of ambition if their marriage is to endure." You, no doubt, have opinions about what is workaholicism and what is laziness. If your partner doesn't share your definitions of these terms, there almost certainly will be conflicts and frustration. Decide what your level of ambition is, and look for a partner who has a similar level.

Chemistry – Chemistry is that overpowering, physical urge that draws two people together. Some people value chemistry immensely when making relationship decisions, while some others can create a loving, successful relationship based on a logical decision about compatibility. Spend some time examining how important chemistry is to you.

Spirituality – Spirituality refers to internal faith and beliefs. While connected to religion, it is different. In this context, religion refers to externals: things like the church you attend, what denomination you practice, what traditions and rituals you follow. Spiritual persons can often have little to do with religion. There is a great opportunity for conflict between a person who seeks answers to problems in prayer and meditation and one that solves issues by problem-solving and logic.

Character – A person's character gets to the very essence of his or her being. Character reflects traits like honesty, courage, and commitment, things that are absolutes when creating a relationship. The task here is not so much to decide what character traits are important, but to discern absolutely that your potential partner has a strong character and holds your values as important.

Creativity – Are you a creative person? If so, can you imagine spending your life with a person who is extremely analytical and logical, who doesn't understand or appreciate your unique viewpoint? If you are not particularly creative, would you enjoy living with a creative person who often falls short in other areas? It is important that your partner appreciate your creative tendencies.

Parenting – Whatever your plans and dreams regarding children, it is of paramount importance that your partner agrees with you. This is often a subject that gets ignored early in the dating process, because the mention of it tends to give a certain unfavorable impression. If you do want children at any point in the future, you should try and determine what parenting skills your potential partner has. How do they act around nieces, nephews, or young children? Are you attracted to their parenting manner? Of course, if a family life is of no interest to you, you should also make that known early to avoid any misunderstanding.

Authenticity – Authenticity is hard for some people. They have been raised to accommodate people and avoid disagreement. But in order to share a brilliant relationship, both partners must be themselves. Of course, the authentic path is not always the most "harmonious" path. You must come to terms with the benefits of a relationship based on the emotional stability of two people who are being true to themselves.

At the end of this exercise, Dr. Warren asks that you complete one last task. Take the ten traits discussed above and rank them in order of importance to you. It will be difficult to meet someone who is perfect for you in every single category. If you've ranked them, you will already know which are essential to you and on which you are willing to compromise.

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TWO CONTRACTS

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THE LIVING TOGETHER CONTRACT

It has become a common practice for couples to live together before they get married. One reason given is to try it out and see if it works. It is considered a trial marriage. If it does not work for either or both of them, then they can end it without too much complexity. There is often no formal mutual agreement of the terms for beginning the arrangement, for living in the arrangement or for dissolving the arrangement. The arrangement unfolds as they go along.

The implied contract: I will stay with you as long as it is good for me and works for me. If something comes up that it is not working for me then we will just go our own ways. Either one of us is free to pull the plug at the point that it is no longer meeting our expectations and needs and desires. We will stay together as long as it is good for me.

Yes, it is less complex and can have less financial costs involved with it, but there are absolutely no guarantees and involves other costs that are not just financial. There is not an expensive engagement ring or an expensive wedding to confirm the commitment. There is no need to get counsel and ask permission from the brides family. The decision to live together or to stop living together involves just the two people. It is much quicker. They can decide today and can move in today. They can work out the details later as they go along. The wedding route takes much more time, preparation, effort and planning.

Ending the living together relationship is so much easier since there was never a formal contract that needs to be dissolved in the complex legal procedures of divorce, yet the separation will most likely involve the same degree of emotional pain and relational scarring as a divorce. They still have to take on some of the complexities of a marriage relationship like handling joint finances, working out conflicts and communication and making joint decisions together.

THE MARRIED FOR LIFE CONTRACT

It is a permanent lifelong contract in which the couple commits themselves to stay married no matter what the conditions (for better or worse, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer, until death do us part). Culturally in America there is a formal way of moving into marriage, often asking the bride's family for permission and blessing. Then there is the ask, "Will you marry me?" There is an engagement ring to confirm the intended commitment. There is the ideal of waiting until after the wedding ceremony to consummate the sexual relationship. It is based upon a serious binding promise or a vow made publicly before God and before witnesses and it is a legal contract. It can only be dissolved by going through the formal legal process of divorce. It is designed to be a permanent lifelong contract and relationship, with all the benefits thereof.

TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE VOWS

MINISTER TO GROOM: “Do you GROOM'S NAME take BRIDE'S NAME to be your wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse, in sadness and in joy, to cherish and continually bestow upon her your heart's deepest devotion, forsaking all others, keep yourself only unto her as long as you both shall live?” **The vow is made before God, before an official, before witnesses and is a formal legal contract.**

The Bible defines marriage in terms of a vow or a contract. Once the contract is agreed upon and accepted it is considered to be permanent and binding for life. The Biblical concept is that of a vow before God. A vow before God is a serious matter. It is designed to be a contract without any loophole. When you commit yourself through a vow you must fulfill it no matter what the cost or how the circumstances change.

When you make a vow - you must do what you say you will do!

Numbers 30:2 –When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said.

Deut 23:21-21 –If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from making a vow, you will not be guilty. Whatever your lips utter you must be sure to do, because you made your vow freely to the LORD your God with your own mouth.

Carefully consider whether you are willing and able to fulfill a vow before making it.

Prov 20:25 – It is a trap for a man to dedicate something rashly and only later to consider his vows.

Eccl 5:4-6 – When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill it. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. And do not protest to the temple messenger, "My vow was a mistake."

Malachi 2:16 – "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel...

Your Marriage Vow

What are you committing yourself to?

What would you like your partner to commit themselves to?

What do you want to include in you marriage vow?

What would you like your partner to include in their marriage vow?

Recommended book...

[The Ring Makes All the Difference: The Hidden Consequences of Cohabitation and the Strong Benefits of Marriage](#) by Glenn T. Stanton – Publication Date: September 1, 2011

Cohabitation is hands-down the fastest growing family form in the United States and most Western nations. Most of these couples view the arrangement as a step toward marriage, or as a substitute for marriage. But does living together truly give people what they are longing for? Author Glenn Stanton offers a compelling factual case that nearly every area of health and happiness is increased by marriage and decreased by cohabitation. How can young couples determine if moving in together is a wise move? With more than half of American women now cohabitating sometime in their adult lives, pastors and counselors need to be prepared to advise young adults with factual and scriptural truth. With credible data and compassion, Stanton explores the reasons why the cohabitation trend is growing, outlines its negative outcomes for men, women and children, and makes a case for why marriage is still the best arrangement for the flourishing of couples and society.